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281421Z Mar 05

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MANAMA 000471

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/26/2015

TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [BA](#)

SUBJECT: OPPOSITION GROUP DEFIES GOB ORDERS, HOLDS PEACEFUL DEMONSTRATION

REF: MANAMA 416

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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Summary  
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1. (C) On March 25, leading Shi'a opposition political society Al Wifaq defied the Ministry of Interior's decision to refuse to permit a demonstration and led several thousand people in a rally calling for constitutional reforms. In a speech at the event, Al Wifaq President Sheikh Ali Salman stressed the importance of national unity and reconciliation.

There were no reports of confrontations between the light security presence and protesters. Following the demonstration, the GOB warned that it may take action against Al Wifaq, and many are predicting that the society could be shut down for 45 days. The arguments of the supporters and defenders of Al Wifaq highlight the perceived trade-off between freedom of expression and security and stability.  
End Summary.

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Protesters defy GOB, demonstrate peacefully  
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2. (SBU) On March 25, thousands of people demonstrated peacefully in the streets of the island of Sitra, immediately south of Manama, in response to leading Shi'a opposition group Al Wifaq's call for constitutional reform. Pro-government newspapers estimated there were 5-7,000 participants in the event, while Al Wifaq members claimed there were anywhere from 30-100,000 people in attendance. Most reasonable guesses cite some 20-30,000 people. Participants commented that the presence of the security forces was light and they did not try to prevent the demonstration from taking place. There were no reports of any clashes or confrontations.

3. (SBU) The demonstration occurred following last-minute jockeying between the Ministry of Interior and Al Wifaq. The Ministry of Interior March 24 turned down Al Wifaq's request to hold the rally, saying that the application had not been signed by the minimum number of Sitra residents. Soon afterwards, the Minister of Islamic Affairs and Al Wifaq leaders met in an attempt to find a compromise. Despite a press report to the contrary, the parties did not find middle ground, and the GOB stood by its refusal to approve the application, citing, in addition to the insufficient number of Sitra residents' signatures on the application, security threats in the region as its reasons for blocking the event.

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Red and white the colors of the day  
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4. (SBU) In his speech at the event and in similar statements in the days leading up to it, Al Wifaq President Sheikh Ali Salman stressed the importance of national unity and reconciliation. Prior to the protest, in response to the government's public statements of alarm about the Ashura celebrations in mid-February, Salman urged participants to refrain from carrying any foreign flags, photos or slogans. (Note: The GOB reacted strongly to the many photos of Khomeini, Khamenei, and Nasrallah, and the occasional Hizballah flag, carried or displayed by Ashura celebrants (reftel and previous). End Note.) Taking a page out of the book of Lebanese opposition protesters, the dominant colors of the march were the red and white of the Bahraini flag. Salman said at the rally that Al Wifaq had chosen Sitra as the site of the event because it was where King Hamad had announced his reconciliation and reform program and invited Bahraini exiles to return to the country in the late 1990's.

5. (SBU) Following the rally, the Minister of Interior announced that the GOB would evaluate whether Al Wifaq's moves violated the 1989 Societies Law. The Minister of Social Affairs, who is responsible for the registration of societies, said she was waiting for the Interior report before deciding whether to take administrative action against Al Wifaq. The GOB could refer the case to the public

prosecutor for legal action. The Cabinet issued a statement March 27 rejecting the "misuse of freedom of expression" through illegal rallies and sit-ins, and stated that abuses would be punished. The statement stressed the need to comply with the constitution, laws, and regulations. Rumors are circulating in the press that the government is considering how to respond to the demonstration, and is contemplating three options: (a) closing Al Wifaq for 45 days; (b) mandating the replacement of the board of directors; or (c) permanently dissolving the organization. A 45-day closure appears most likely.

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Participants declare focus on national unity  
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16. (C) Al Wifaq board member Nizar Al Qari told EmbOff that his society made every effort to ensure the protest was peaceful and to show that the constitution is a national political issue and not a sectarian one. Protesters waved Bahraini flags throughout the event. Al Qari said he heard demonstrators urging one another not to retaliate if the security forces tried to disperse the crowd. Aziz Abul, an opposition leader advocating constitutional reform, stressed to EmbOff that although Al Wifaq disagreed with the GOB's decision not to approve the rally, it tried to respect the government and there was no attempt to embarrass or offend GOB officials or political groups. He noted that the event took place a week before the April 1-3 Formula One races and was held in a location far from high traffic areas and places where international visitors would congregate. Abul commented that the demonstration was important to national security as it gave people a peaceful way to voice their frustrations.

17. (SBU) In his Friday prayer sermon just hours before the demonstration on March 25, prominent Shi'a cleric Sheikh Issa Qassem reiterated the right of the people to protest and hoped there would be an open dialogue between the GOB and the opposition. He stressed the importance of national unity and urged people to remember that Bahrainis share one religion, one country they love, and one future. Shi'a Sheikh Hussain Najati said in his Friday sermon that it would be very difficult to ask people to stop holding demonstrations if the government continued to refuse to deal with the opposition's political concerns.

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Claims that demonstration threatens security  
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18. (SBU) On March 25, six societies (four Sunni and two mixed Sunni/Shi'a) ran a full page advertisement in all Bahraini daily papers calling for a cancellation of the rally and warning that it could lead to a political and economic crisis. One group applied to hold a counter demonstration in the Sunni stronghold of Muharraq, but the Minister of Interior refused to issue a permit.

19. (SBU) Numerous Sunni clerics spoke out against the demonstration. Salafi MP Sheikh Ali Mattar announced in his sermon that rallies are contrary to Shari'a law as they threaten public safety. Sheikh Juma Tawfeeq said there was great danger in using freedom of expression to reinforce the interests of one sect. Sheikh Ebrahim Busandal acknowledged that protesting is a right protected by the constitution, but recommended that Bahrain's political societies take issues to parliament and not to the street.

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Media reaction  
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10. (SBU) Columnists' reactions to the demonstration were mixed. In Akhbar Al Khaleej, Sameera Rajab accused Al Wifaq of sectarianism and doubted that participants who held Bahraini flags were genuinely loyal to the country. Radhi Al Sammak wrote that in choosing Sitra as the event location, Al Wifaq sent the wrong message to the GOB as it was the site of some of the fiercest clashes between Shi'a and security forces in the 1990s. Sawsan Al Shaer praised Al Wifaq for organizing a disciplined rally in a non-commercial area and for encouraging participants to hold Bahraini flags and support national unity. She commented that the rally was a constitutional right and should not have been banned, but lauded the security forces for their self-restraint in dealing with the protesters.

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Comment

11. (C) The demonstration, and the government's reaction to it, highlight a contrast in perspectives that we expect to hear more about as this and other democratization issues develop -- the perceived trade-off between freedom of expression and security and stability. Government officials

and their defenders correctly point out that democracy is relatively new to Bahrain -- the first elections in thirty years were held less than three years ago -- and that Bahrain is undergoing a normal process of maturation. Oppositionists complain that the King took many important steps to open up society and take into account Bahrain's Shi'a citizens, but say that this process stalled after the 2002 elections. Addressing the opposition's concerns through legal or administrative means will not solve what is at its core a political problem. Neither side has put itself into a corner yet on the issue of constitutional reform, and there is still an opportunity to find common ground. But thus far, neither side has demonstrated the leadership or initiative to move to resolve the issue in a mutually satisfactory way.

MONROE